

## ***Captatio Benevolentiae:***

### **Potential Risks and Benefits of Flattering the Audience in a Public Political Speech**

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#### **Abstract**

Given that flattery is a form of impression management and a persuasive tool in interpersonal communication, two experiments investigated the effect of a (fictitious) political candidate praising the audience during a meeting. The flattery was addressed to the social category to which participants belong (direct flattery condition) or to another social category (observed flattery condition). The flattering message (vs control condition) employed in the context of a public speech induced a more positive candidate evaluation on both the members of the flattered audience and the observers. The effect was not mediated by degree of message scrutiny, nor by suspicion of source ulterior motives and it was not moderated by the level of identification with the audience. This suggests that the compliment to the audience leads the members of the flattered category to reciprocate liking and the observers to transfer the source's attitude recursively (TAR effect). Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

#### **Keywords**

flattery, persuasion, political communication, ingratiation, impression management.

*Captatio benevolentiae* is a rhetoric strategy based on using flattery to ingratiate oneself with others and gain goodwill (Jones & Wortman, 1973). Despite the fact that politicians seem to use this strategy extensively in their speeches (e.g., Smith, Whitehead III, Melo, Correa, & Inch, 2014), to the best of our knowledge, no one has systematically documented the persuasive effects of praising the audience. The role of flattery in influencing impression formation and compliance in interpersonal (one-to-one) communication contexts is well known (Gordon, 1996; Grant, Fabrigar, & Lim, 2010; Seiter, 2007; Seiter & Dutson, 2007). However, scant empirical evidence is available regarding the influence exerted by such a positive appeal in a one-to-many context, such as that of political communication. It is worth noting that, in this context, the message often reaches both the target (i.e., a specific audience) and, indirectly through mass media, other observers. Therefore, the distinct effects of flattery on the target audience and on observers should be clarified. To fill the gap, this article investigates the impact of a political candidate's use of this ingratiation tactic on both a target audience's and observers' evaluations of the candidate.

### **The Influence of Flattery**

In interpersonal relationships, flattery may be a management impression and/or a persuasive tool. Indeed, other enhancement is one of the ingratiation tactics: a person may compliment the interlocutor in order to make a positive impression (Jones, 1964; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Pandey & Singh, 1986). In particular, according to Godfrey, Jones, and Lord (1986) a strategic ingratiator is specifically motivated to be liked, in contrast to a self-promoter who wants to be perceived as competent, with the former task being easier than the latter. Meta-analysis by Gordon (1996) confirmed that the other-enhancement tactic improves the target's liking of the source, and, to a much lesser extent, the source's performance evaluation (i.e., his/her competence).

In the context of a persuasive communication, flattery may also be a means of achieving, directly or via source likability, the desired compliance (Grant, Fabrigar, & Lim, 2010). The value of flattery as a persuasive tactic has been typically tested in the context of marketing. For example, some studies (Seiter, 2007; Seiter & Dutson, 2007; Strutton, Pelton, & Tanner, 1996) have shown

that a salesperson who compliments a prospective customer is more likely to be seen as trustworthy and to facilitate the buyer's compliance than one who does not. Actually, the majority of ingratiation techniques identified in interactions between salespersons and shoppers are compliments, praise, and admiration expressions (Bailey, 2015; Strutton et al., 1996).

However, other enhancement is not a riskless tactic. Indeed, if the flattered recipient attributes the compliment to the source's sincere positive evaluation of the target, s/he would reciprocate source liking, because people like someone who helps them to reinforce their self-esteem (Beckman & Secord, 1959; Gordon, 1996; Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998). On the other hand, if a customer who is complimented suspects that the salesperson has an ulterior motive, the persuasive effect weakens or even reverses (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Main, Dahl, & Darke, 2007; Pandey & Singh, 1986, Sayedi & Shulman, 2015). The flattery effect, therefore, should depend on the outcome of an attributional process (Brown, 1990; Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977).

The first goal of the present study is to explore whether this may also work in a one-to-many communication context such as a public political speech. Three studies by Garcia, Miller, Smith, and Mackie (2006) offer evidence suggesting that a group-level compliment elicits emotions in individuals with an intensity at least as great as an individual-level compliment, except when the group-level compliment appeals to a group stereotypic dimension. Following this line of reasoning, we could expect that stereotype-irrelevant flattery of individuals as group members will induce the same effects observed in the interpersonal context.

In addition, political messages addressed to an audience on a particular occasion are often spread by the media to a wider audience, and thus their effects may go beyond the specific target. Members of social groups other than the flattered group could attribute the compliment either to the real quality of that audience or to the politician's need to gain appreciation. Since the observed flattery cannot serve a self-esteem reinforcement function, instead of reciprocated liking, the observer will question the source's sincerity and evaluate the ingratiation less favourably with

respect to the flattery target (Vonk, 2002). Actually, studies carried out in a commercial interpersonal scenario have confirmed that the latter is the case (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). In sum, previous findings suggest that, in an interpersonal one-to-one context, flattery is likely to induce source appreciation in the target but may have a weaker (or even detrimental) effect on bystanders.

The persuasive function of flattery is particularly interesting in the political domain where gaining public trust is a central goal.

### **From Interpersonal to Political Communication**

A political candidate can use flattery in two main ways: (a) addressing it to a rival in the hope of appearing fair, kind, and trustworthy in the eyes of the prospective electorate, or (b) wheedling the audience in order to gain its consensus. Two studies documented the effects of flattery towards a rival in the political domain (Cavazza, 2016, 2017). Both were carried out through a fictitious scenario in which a political candidate flattered (vs attacked vs neutral control condition) the opponent. A brief compliment to the rival induced positive emotions and source trustworthiness (but not competence evaluation), which mediated the positive effect of flattery on the likelihood of voting. These findings were interpreted as being due to the ‘transfer of attitudes recursively’ effect (TAR, Gawronski & Walther, 2008), which is the outcome of a propositional process based on attributional inferences, as already analysed in respect to negative propaganda (Carraro, Gawronski, & Castelli, 2010): the source of a communication induces in the observer an impression connoted as the evaluation s/he is conveying about somebody else. Thus, praising the rival entailed a positive backlash effect on the source.

No attention has been paid by socio-psychological research to the other ‘positive’ tactic political candidates may employ in their public speeches - i.e., to directly flatter the audience. When addressing and praising a specific social category (e.g., entrepreneurs or inhabitants of a region), a politician’s discourse may be also reported by the media and heard by members of other social categories. Thus, individuals directly flattered as members of the praised category may react to the

message in a different way compared to observers. The above review offers suggestive evidence that, in this case, the complimented target may believe in the source's sincerity, because s/he fulfils group-enhancement motives, and thus automatically reciprocates liking. Members of other social categories, indirectly exposed to the flattery, may "transfer the attitudes recursively" (Gawronski & Walther, 2008) - i.e., attribute the positivity of the candidate's compliment to his/her own kindness, as already shown in the case of flattering a rival (Cavazza, 2016). However, observers may also activate a social comparison inducing them to question the source's selfless sincerity, thus dampening their evaluation of the source. Indeed, when an out category is complimented, bystanders may cast doubt on the source's truthfulness in order to protect their self-esteem. This latter effect can be particularly strong in the political domain, whereby distrust dramatically increases (McGraw, Lodge, & Jones, 2002). In addition, the effects of both direct and observed flattery could be larger for those who identify strongly with their category, compared to those whose identification is low, since identification with the praised audience may boost the motivation to reciprocate liking, whereas being highly identified with the out category may increase the salience of social comparison and thus suspicion of ulterior motives.

Furthermore, addressing a specific audience may create differences in the degree of involvement with the message and, consequently, its scrutiny: direct flattery may induce higher involvement and thus higher message scrutiny than the observed flattery (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; for a review, see Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997). This higher scrutiny, in turn, may amplify the hypothesised positive effect of flattery for the praised category.

We performed two studies investigating the effects of a flattering message (vs a neutral one) on members of the target audience and members of a different category.

## **Study 1**

The first study explored the effectiveness of the so-called *captatio benevolentiae* – i.e., flattering the audience for members of the praised category and for observers.

Specifically, concerning the praised audience, we aimed to test whether the *captatio benevolentiae* improves source evaluation either as a result of a direct automatic tendency to reciprocate liking for the person valuing one's own category, or as a result of a more effortful process stemming from higher involvement and implying higher message scrutiny. In operative terms, we expected that the flattering message would induce a better impression of the source compared to the control neutral message (Hp1), either directly (Hp1a) or mediated by message scrutiny (Hp1b).

Concerning the observers, we aimed to test whether the flattery either has a positive TAR effect on source evaluation or induces suspicion of ulterior motives which, in turn, should dampen the judgement on the source. In operative terms, we expected that the observed flattery would either induce a better impression of the source compared to the control neutral message (Hp2a) or induce a worse impression of the source mediated by suspicion (Hp2b). Alternatively, these two opposite effects could add up and neutralise each other, as would be suggested by higher levels of suspicion in the observed flattery than in the control condition, along with a lack of difference in terms of source evaluation (Hp2c).

In addition, we explored whether a high (vs low) level of group identification is a necessary condition for the flattery effect to appear in both cases of the praised category members and the observers.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Sixty-three university students at Modena-Reggio Emilia University (from Departments of Communication and Economics, and Education and Humanities) volunteered for this experiment (47 women; mean age = 23.83; *SD* = 3.09).

The effect of sex has been tested in all analyses; it did not yield any significant main or interaction effects and therefore will not be presented.

### ***Materials and Procedure***

Before any manipulation, participants completed 6 items of the Social Identity Scale (e.g., “I have a lot in common with other students of my dept”; Cameron, 2004), in order to test a potential moderating role of identification with “the students of your department” (answer scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .76$ ).

Then participants had to imagine a fictitious scenario built on a domain familiar to participants: the campaign for the election of a student rep in the University administrative board. It was said that during the campaign, the candidates presented themselves to student assemblies, and the videos of these assemblies were stored on the University web-site. Thus, participants had to imagine to watch one of this video, and read a passage (about 250 words long) of the speech given by a fictitious candidate, Paolo Alberti. In the direct flattery condition, the event was titled as a meeting in the same department to which participants belong; in the observed condition it took place in the department of Philosophy (no participants belonged to that department), and in the control condition (without flattery to the audience) no information about the department to which the student audience belonged was given. Both in direct and in observed flattery conditions a sentence was added to the control message after candidate presentation: “I am sure that here I will gather many good ideas, because I’ve always valued the students of this department”. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions.

After the manipulation, participants evaluated the candidate through 6 adjectives (skilled, unqualified, uninformed, sincere, reliable, and dishonest), and answered one question about the intention to vote for the candidate. An exploratory factor analysis including these 7 items revealed a single factor explaining 56.79% of variance (factor loadings  $> .67$ ), therefore a general index of source appreciation was calculated ( $\alpha = .87$ ; range 1-7). Finally, participants answered two questions (i.e., how much do you think the message was manipulative and hypocritical,  $r = .35$ ,  $p < .004$ ) assessing suspicion of an ulterior motive, as well as other questions that were not used for the purpose of the present study.

A thought listing task (Miller & Baron, 1973) followed: participants were invited to write down every thought they formulated during the message reading. Three indicators of message elaboration were calculated: number of words, number of thoughts (counted by a person blind of the hypothesis), and proportion of positive thoughts (i.e., those expressing positive source evaluation) on the total. In addition, participants answered to 4 true/false questions about the message content (the questions did not concern the presence/absence of a flattery). A recall index was calculated ranging from 0 = all wrong to 4 = all correct.

## **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 illustrates the results of a series of analyses of variance on the source appreciation and the indicators of message elaboration as a function of the experimental manipulation. The flattery manipulation significantly affected source appreciation, which was highest when the candidate flattered the category to which the participants belong (direct flattery condition), slightly decreased when he complimented another category, and was lowest when no flattery was included. Concerning statistical significance, candidate appreciation in the direct flattery condition was significantly higher than in the control condition, but neither these conditions differed significantly from the observed flattery one.

In contrast, the manipulation did not affect the suspicion of the source having ulterior instrumental motives for complimenting the audience. However, the source-audience shared membership into the broad student category may have led to a relatively low suspicion of the source having ulterior motives ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ). Alternatively, some participants may have not paid attention to the meeting venue (their own department vs the Philosophy Department) and thus may have not understood the manipulation. We acknowledge this potential limitation and included a manipulation check in Study 2.

A better recall of the message content emerged in both the flattery conditions compared to the control one: thus, the mere presence of flattery, be it directed to the respondents' category or to an out category, focused the attention on message content, but this greater attention did not translate



into a deeper elaboration or positive cognitive reaction to the message. Indeed, all the indicators of message scrutiny (number of thoughts, number of words used to verbalise the thoughts, and proportion of positive thoughts in the total) did not differ as a function of the experimental manipulation.

In addition, we should note that 19 participants out of 63 did not complete the thought list, but they are equally distributed across the three experimental conditions,  $\chi^2(2) = 1.48; p = .48$ .

The significant difference between the direct flattery condition and the control condition in terms of the source appreciation confirmed Hp1, whereas the lack of effects of the manipulation on message scrutiny suggests that *captatio benevolentiae* improved the attitude towards the source among members of the praise category, as an automatic tendency to reciprocate liking (Hp1a).

As far as the observed flattery is concerned, we note that it did not induce a significantly better impression of the source compared to the control condition, preventing a full acceptance of Hp2a. In addition, a lack of effect in terms of suspicion also disconfirmed Hp2b and, as the observed flattery effect did not differ from that of direct flattery on source appreciation, we may argue that a TAR effect was to some extent in operation.

In order to detect the boundary conditions for the effects of flattering the audience, we tested the potential moderating role of group identification. The regression including two dummy variables (direct flattery and observed flattery, control condition as reference), along with the moderator (group identification) and the interaction terms, revealed that neither the effect of the direct flattery,  $b = .18, SE = .33, p = .58$ , nor that of observed flattery,  $b = .04, SE = .29, p = .88$ , were moderated by respondents' identification with the category of their department students. The same was true for the effect of audience flattery on the indicators of message scrutiny ( $p > .42$  for all the interactions between experimental conditions and identification).

To sum up, the present study offered evidence that a rhetorical tactic like *captatio benevolentiae* is effective in inducing a positive impression of the source among audience members, but also that it has no detrimental effects among observers. In addition, these findings suggest that

the positive effect among the audience members was due to reciprocity, rather than to a deeper message scrutiny or less suspicion of the source having ulterior instrumental motives. Finally, participants' level of identification with their own category did not moderate the found effect.

However, these results - the non-significant difference between the two flattery conditions in terms of source appreciation, the lack of effects of manipulation on suspicion, and the absence of moderating effects by identification - could be due to our specific manipulation of the categories involved. Indeed, members of the praised and the observed categories shared membership of the broad university student category, which might have hindered the activation of the social comparison. This is why we performed a second study in which the fictitious candidate was running for political office and his speech was addressed to two more distant social categories: university students versus farmers.

## **Study 2**

The second study was performed in order to re-test the effects of flattering the audience on source appreciation, with more distant social categories as target audiences. In addition, in order to clearly disentangle the genuine effect of the flattery from that of simply addressing a speech to a specific audience, we devised a full 2 (audience: university students vs farmers) x 2 (flattery: present vs absent) between participants factorial design. As a limitation of Study 1 was the small sample size, we also recruited more participants for Study 2.

Once again, building on previous results (Chan & Sengupta, 2013; Garcia et al., 2006; Gordon, 1996; Vonk, 2002), and in line with Study 1, we expected that the members of the flattered audience would simply reciprocate the positive evaluation of the candidate as a way of validating his/her positive esteem for their category. On the other hand, drawing on the findings of Study 1 and previous studies on negative (Carraro et al., 2010) and positive political campaigns (Cavazza, 2016, 2017), we expected that observers would infer a candidate's positive qualities through his/her praising message (TAR effect). However, considering previous results regarding observers of

personal flattery, the members of other distant non-flattered categories (observers) might also have raised suspicions of ulterior motives, which in turn should depress candidate appreciation.

In operative terms, we formulated the following competing hypotheses:

Hp1. If the TAR effect prevails for observers, we should obtain a significant main effect of the flattery manipulation, irrespective of the target audience.

Hp2. If observers raise significantly more sincerity questions about the source in respect to the members of the flattered category (Hp2a), we would also expect a significant interaction between the flattery manipulation and the target audience (respondents vs another social category) (Hp2b).

## **Method**

### *Participants*

One hundred and seventy-five Italian university students (113 women) aged 20-35 years ( $M = 22.38$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ) were recruited through student mailing lists. Participants gave their informed consent to complete an online questionnaire regarding political communication, implemented on the LimeSurvey platform. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions. On the page after the presentation of the fictitious scenario, with the candidate's message addressing a specific audience (see below), participants had to remember the audience category. Forty-one of them (23.4%) failed to respond correctly and were eliminated from the subsequent analyses. The final sample thus consisted of 134 participants (89 women).<sup>1</sup> The retained participants did not differ from those eliminated from the database in terms of age, education, political engagement, and level of identification with the category of university students.

### *Design, Procedure and Measures*

A 2 x 2 between-participants design, manipulating the audience to which a political candidate was speaking (university students vs farmers) and the presence (vs absence) of an opening flattering sentence, was performed. After answering three questions about their political engagement (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ), participants were asked to read a passage of a message (about 120 words long, a synthesis of that used by Cavazza, 2016) allegedly given by a male political candidate in a

public campaign meeting with either university students or farmers. In the flattery condition, a sentence was added in which the candidate complimented the audience. Actually, the included flattery sentence did not reveal the target of the flattery, which was instead manipulated mainly through the context in which the speech was allegedly given. Thus, the flattery sentence read in both experimental conditions as follows: ‘I believe that *you* are a resource that will help our country grow. I know that *you* are able to express the creativity and the intelligence that is the engine needed by our country in order to find the way out of the grasp of unemployment.’

The flattery manipulation was subsequently checked by two items measuring the perceived degree of benevolence of the speaker towards his audience ( $r = .67, p < .001$ ). Moreover, two items tapped participants’ identification with university students ( $r = .64, p < .001$ ) and two with farmers ( $r = .53, p < .001$ ). After reading the speech, participants evaluated the source using the same six adjectives as in Study 1 to measure the impression of the candidate and two questions about the likelihood of voting for that candidate. A principal component analysis including the six items tapping the impression of the candidate (after reversing negative adjectives) and the two concerning intention to vote for him revealed a single factor explaining 44.94% of variance (factor loading  $> .32$ ). Therefore, a single index of source appreciation was computed ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

Participants then answered two questions assessing suspicion of ulterior motives (i.e., To what extent do you think the message was: manipulative and hypocritical,  $r = .48, p < .001$ ). In addition, to rule out that the hypothesised effects depend on the perception that a politician flattering the audience represents that social category, we also asked participants about the extent to which they felt the candidate represents “people like you” and “your values” ( $r = .65$ ). All the answer scales ranged from 1 to 7. Finally, they reported their political orientation on the left–right political spectrum (range 1-10) and completed a standard socio-demographic form. Time taken to complete the questionnaire was registered as a proxy of message scrutiny.

## **Results**

### *Preliminary Analyses and Manipulation Check*

The effects of participants' sex, age, political engagement ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), and self-reported position on the 10-point left–right continuum ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ) were tested in all the analyses. As age, sex and political engagement significantly affected the candidate evaluation, their effect was controlled for in all the subsequent analyses.

All participants identified themselves more with the university student category ( $M = 5.99$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than with the farmer category ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $F(1, 133) = 1008.74$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .88$ .

To check the effectiveness of the flattery manipulation, we performed a one-way ANOVA with presence/absence of the compliment as the between-participants factor, and perceived benevolence towards the audience as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed the significant expected effect of the manipulation,  $F(1, 132) = 14.24$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .10$ . The perception of the candidate's benevolence towards his audience was higher in the flattery condition ( $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) than in the control condition ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ).

#### *Effects of Direct and Observed Flattery*

A first 2 (audience: university students vs farmers) x 2 (flattery vs control) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the suspicion of the source having ulterior motives for his compliment did not show any variations due to the manipulated factors (global  $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ), allowing us to reject  $H_{p2a}$ .

In contrast, the same ANOVA performed on the candidate appreciation showed, as expected ( $H_{p1}$ ), the main effect of the flattery manipulation,  $F(1, 126) = 4.05$ ,  $p = .046$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ , indicating that flattering the audience improved appreciation of the candidate, irrespective of recipients' membership of that category. Also, the main effect of the audience manipulation was marginally significant,  $F(1, 126) = 3.90$ ,  $p = .050$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ , showing that, even though the effect was weak, participants evaluated the fictitious candidate more positively when he addressed his speech to the category they belong to rather than to another category. Instead, in contrast with  $H_{p2b}$ , the interaction effect proved to be non-significant ( $p = .74$ ) (Table 2).

On average, completing the questionnaire took 350.46 seconds ( $SD = 195.16$ ). The 2 x 2 ANOVA which included this time as the dependent variable did not show significant main or interaction effects. This is in line with Study 1 and suggests that the flattery effects illustrated above were not dependent on a higher cognitive elaboration of the message. Also the perception that the candidate represents participants' own values was not affected by experimental manipulations.

Finally, political engagement, political orientation, and the differential identification in the two social categories did not moderate the flattery effect on the candidate evaluation.

## **Discussion**

The present study, comparing evaluations formulated by the respondents as members vs observers of a flattered or non-flattered audience, confirmed that the flattering message employed in the context of a one-to-many political communication exerted some persuasive effects. The results showed that, in line with  $H_{p1}$ , the message flattering the audience improved participants' evaluation of the source, irrespective of the social category to which it was addressed. As experimental manipulation did not affect the length of time used to respond to the questionnaire, we can interpret this effect as a judgement that does not involve high cognitive resources. As members of the flattered category, participants reciprocated the positive evaluation put forward by the candidate, without having raised suspicions of ulterior motives. On the other hand, as observers of a (fictitious) situation in which the source flattered an out category, participants evaluated the candidate in the same way, without raising questions about his selfless sincerity. Our findings suggest to exclude that the elicited effects depend on the perception of the candidate as representing one's own values. Thus, we can infer that, as in Study 1, the tendency to transfer the source attitude recursively (TAR effect) overwhelmed a potential suspicious attitude. In line with Study 1, the *captatio benevolentiae* effect proved to work irrespective of participants' identification with the praised category. It is worth noting that suspicion is particularly relevant in the political domain (McGraw et al., 2002) in which this second study was set. The fact that observing a politician flattering his/her audience did not increase this distrust tendency supports the efficacy of the *captatio benevolentiae* rhetoric tactic.

An unexpected effect of the manipulated category to which the political discourse was addressed emerged. For the candidate, addressing his words to the respondents' social category was enough to gain some consensus. Since this effect was not due to a heightened message scrutiny in the case of a direct message, we could interpret this finding too as a reciprocity effect. However, we did not include farmers as participants, thus the present data cannot rule out the alternative interpretation that respondents appreciate a political candidate focusing his attention on young people as a specific socially valued category, regardless of the fact of being part of it or not.

### **General Discussion**

When flattery of the audience is included in a public speech, it may affect not only the praised category, but also the members of a non-flattered category hearing (or reading) the message at a second stage, when it is spread through the media. Across two experimental studies, we found evidence that, in a one-to-many communication, the *captatio benevolentiae* is a rhetoric tactic worth using. Indeed, it is able to improve source appreciation both in the praised target and in out categories. The finding that flattery did not increase message scrutiny and did not imply the raising of suspicion about selfless sincerity of the source among observers suggests that the compliment to the audience led its members to a relatively "mindless" tendency to reciprocate liking, due to the social norm of reciprocity (Gordon, 1996), while inducing observers to transfer the source's attitude recursively (TAR; Gawronski & Walther, 2008). These effects seem to be pretty general as they were not moderated by respondents' identification with their own category.

A strength of our research is the difference between the two scenarios. Both involved a candidate running for office relatively close (i.e., a student rep in Study 1) or relatively distant (i.e., a national political seat in Study 2) from participants. As a consequence, the in-group/out-group flattery manipulation was more effective in the second case (university students vs farmers) than in the first (students of your department vs students of philosophy), where the overarching category of "university students" could have been activated. These differences were actually reflected in the

suspicion of the source having an ulterior motive, more pronounced towards the politician (Study 2) than the student rep (Study 1), but were still unaffected by the experimental manipulations.

Of course, the scenarios used are only a small fragment of what happens when citizens are exposed to political communication, and this low ecological validity demands caution when generalising our results. Much of the information relevant for a candidate evaluation was simply not available (e.g., party affiliation of the source). Such a bare context and the low relevance of the experimental task for the participants could have promoted quicker cognitive processes than those citizens activate when facing a complex and relevant task such as deciding which candidate to vote for. In particular, the experimental scenario may have increased the salience of the flattering message included in the speech.

In addition, our studies are an initial exploration of the effects of flattering the audience and our results suggest that merely knowing that a politician flattered an out category does not induce suspicion in observers, at least in a minimal experimental context. However, it is likely that other pertinent and realistic information (e.g., participants knowing that the candidate has previously flattered different audiences or categories opposing the source's party) could have promoted a more sceptical appraisal of the message (see Brandt, Vonk, & van Knippenberg, 2009, 2011). Therefore, future research should involve larger samples and include behavioural measures, beyond the present essential and imaginary experimental settings (Dolinski, 2018). For instance, even though the TAR effects was found regardless of whether observers did or did not have prior knowledge about the source (Gawronski and Walther 2008), it would be interesting to find out what happens when more contextual information is provided about the source's party affiliation and his previous flattering behaviour. Further studies may also investigate the factors that are good candidate for promoting or hindering automatic, content-independent processing of positive political messages. Since Gawronski and Walther (2008) found that the TAR effect was overridden by perceivers' prior attitude about the target, a boundary condition to explore in the future would be the role of



participants' prior attitude towards the praised out category, and the degree to which the compliment they hear is in line or in contrast with it.

Despite these limitations, the present research contributes to our theoretical and practical understanding of the role of compliments in communicative exchanges. As concerns the political domain, the current studies contribute to support the 'positive propaganda' hypothesis (Cavazza, 2016, 2017) which suggests that the use of flattery in political communication (instead of verbal aggression) can have significant psychological and behavioural consequences in influencing citizens. Globally, the studies carried out in this domain suggest that flattery is a communication tactic worth using by politicians, as there was no condition in which the flattering message was detrimental in comparison to the message without a compliment, at least in minimal experimental settings.

Furthermore, the present results also extend previous research regarding the impact of flattery in interpersonal communication, as they showed that flattery may be used for impression management and as a persuasion tactic also in a one-to-many communication context.

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## **Note**

1. This percentage falls in the range (14-46%) of participants failing to pay sufficient attention to the instructions found by Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko (2009) who analysed a set of social psychological studies. These authors suggest to eliminate these participants in order to avoid an excessive decreasing of the signal-to-noise ratio of the data set.

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**Table 1.** Effects of Flattering the Audience in a Political Speech on Source Appreciation, Recall of Message Content, Number of Thoughts, Number of Words, and Proportion of Positive Thought as a Function of the Experimental Conditions (Means; Standard Deviations Given in Parenthesis, Study

	Direct Flattery	Observed Flattery	No Flattery (Control)	<i>F</i> (2,60)	$\eta^2_p$
Source	5.31a	4.98ab	4.61b	3.44, $p = .04$	.10
Appreciation	(.83)	(.76)	(.95)		
Suspicion of	2.65	2.93	2.98	.45, $p = .86$	.01

1).

Ulterior Motive	(1.20)	(1.18)	(1.21)		
Recall of	3.35a	3.41a	2.67b	4.84, $p = .01$	.14
Message Content	(.81)	(.80)	(.97)		
Number of	2.20	1.86	2.14	.15, $p = .86$	.00
Thought	(1.54)	(2.64)	(2.01)		
Number of	25.60	29.86	25.28	.07, $p = .93$	.00
Words	(21.83)	(57.82)	(30.34)		
Positive Thought	.32	.32	.12	2.38, $p = .10$	.07
Proportion	(.40)	(.37)	(.18)		

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*Note.* Within each row, means with different subscripts differ at  $p < .05$  (Bonferroni post-hoc test).



**Table 2.** Effects of Flattering the Audience in a Political Speech on Source Appreciation as a Function of the Experimental Conditions (Means; Standard Deviations Given in Parenthesis, Study 2).

	Flattery Present	Flattery Absent	Total
Audience			
University Students	4.52 (.80)	4.27 (.86)	4.39 (.83)
Farmers	4.34 (.70)	4.02 (1.03)	4.20 (1.28)
Total	4.43 (.75)	4.15 (.94)	4.30 (.86)